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Biographical Notice with Portrait

of

Dr. Robert Bell

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Queen's University at Kingston

ROBERT BELL.

Robert Bell, I.S.O., F.R.S., M.D., C.M., D.Sc. (Cantab.), LL.D., F.G.S., F.G.S.A., who was formerly Assistant Director and Chief Geologist of the Geological Survey of Canada and for several years acted as Director of the Survey, was one of the charter members of The Royal Society of Canada. He was born in Toronto on the 3rd of June, 1841, and was thus in his 77th year when he died at Portage la Prairie, Manitoba, on June 19, 1917.

Both his grandfather, Rev. Wm. Bell, and his father, Rev. Andrew Bell, were ministers of the Church of Scotland. His father was one of the pioneers of Canadian geology, and when Sir William Logan was called by the government of the United Provinces of Upper and Lower Canada to establish a Geological Survey, one of the first Canadians with whom he conferred on this subject was Dr. Bell's father, Rev. Andrew Bell. Dr. Bell therefore came justly by his predilection for geological and natural history studies.

Dr. Bell obtained his early education at the grammar school of the county of Prescott and afterwards studied at McGill University, under the distinguished scientists Dr. T. Sterry Hunt and Dr. Sutherland, receiving his degree in Applied Science in 1861 and the Governor's gold medal. He afterwards pursued his studies in Edinburgh, taking chemistry under Lords Playfair and Lister and Professors Dittmar and Crum Brown, and botany under Professor J. H. Balfour. At the age of 21 years he became professor of Chemistry and Natural Science at Queen's University, a chair which he held for five years from 1863 to 1867.

Previous to accepting the professorship at Queen's, Dr. Bell in 1857, at the early age of 16 years, had joined the staff of the Geological Survey of Canada under Sir W. E. Logan, and for over 50 years he was connected with that branch of the Government service. He had the privilege in his early history on the Survey under Logan of being associated with Murray, Hunt, Billings and Richardson, all men of high ideals and attainments with whom it was an inspiration to work and from whom he imbibed an enthusiasm for geological exploration and research which he retained throughout his life.

During his 50 years of active connection with the Geological Survey, Dr. Bell accomplished an enormous amount of geological work, but he was pre-eminent as an explorer, and it is in that branch of work that his name will be remembered by succeeding generations. He had practical training as a surveyor at McGill University, and to

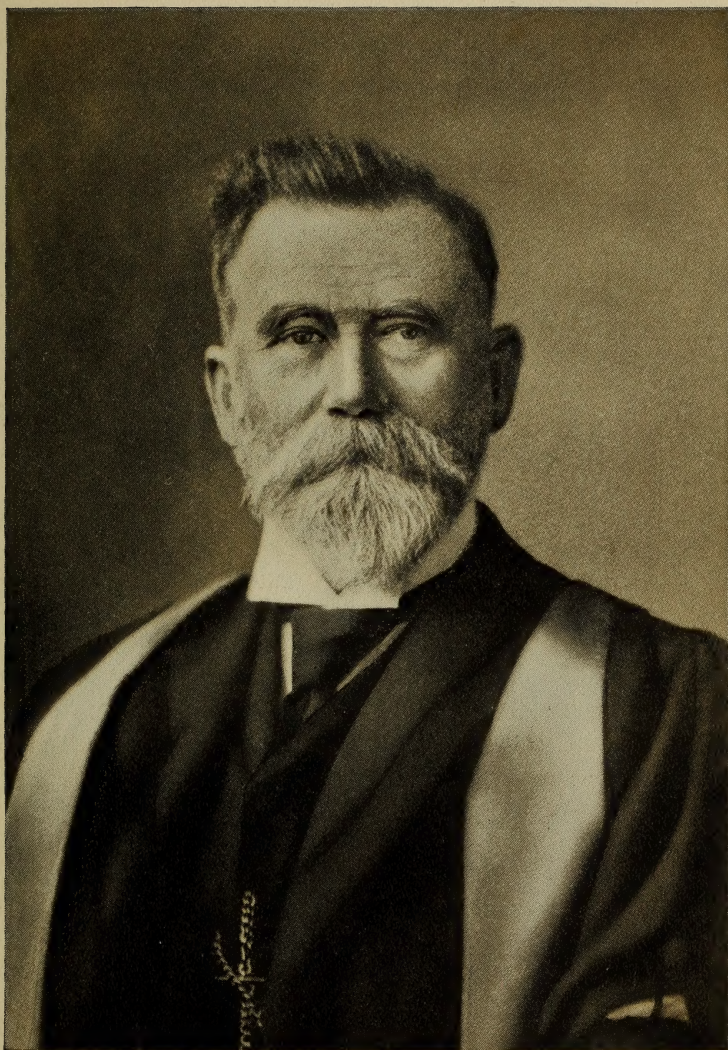
further equip himself to meet emergencies that might arise in the course of his exploratory journeys he completed a course in medicine and surgery at the same University in 1878. His geographical and geological surveys covered a great part of northern Quebec and Ontario and the region about Hudson Bay, as well as northern Manitoba, Alberta and the North West Territories, and he traversed at one time or other most of the larger streams and lakes of these regions, many of them being surveyed by him for the first time. The Bell river, the western branch of the Nottaway river, is officially named after him.

His reports contain a fund of information on the geological and physical features of that northern country which was of great value to the government and the locating engineers at the time that the building of the National Transcontinental railway was under discussion, and is appreciated at the present time as different portions of that region become opened up.

He was attached to several expeditions into Hudson Bay, and was able through his knowledge of conditions in Hudson straits to furnish the government with a great deal of valuable information when the question arose of a railway to Hudson Bay and the navigation of the straits. He was medical officer and geologist to the "Neptune" expedition in 1884 and the "Alert" expedition of 1885. Again when on the "Diana" expedition in 1897, he surveyed the south shore of Baffinland and penetrated that island to the great lakes of its interior.

During his numerous explorations he naturally came in contact with many tribes of Indians and was deeply interested in their customs, folk lore and archæology. This was one of his chief recreations, and his collection of native legends numbers several hundreds. He thoroughly understood the mind of the Indians, and by his intelligent treatment of them was able to gain their confidence so that at Grand Lake, Quebec, he was made an honorary chief of the Algonquin Indians of that district.

Dr. Bell was deeply interested in forestry, and during his long journeys had an excellent opportunity to study the geographical distribution of Canadian forest trees. As early as 1873, he prepared a large map showing the northern limits of the principal trees in the four original provinces of the Dominion. Later he published a map to accompany the report of the Geological Survey for 1879-80 which showed the northern range of the trees east of the Rocky Mountains. This was supplemented in 1897 by another map, giving much additional information compiled from observations of his own and data furnished by his colleagues and other travellers.



ROBERT BELL

In recognition of his contributions to our knowledge of the geography of Canada Dr. Bell was awarded the King's or "Patron's Gold Medal" of the Royal Geographical Society in 1906. In the same year he was the recipient of the "Cullum Gold Medal" from the American Geographical Society and was the first Canadian to receive that honour. He was the Canadian correspondent to the "Royal Scottish Geographical Society" and to "la Société de Géographie" of France.

Besides the degrees received in course at McGill University, B.A.Sc., 1861; M.D., C.M., 1878; D.Sc., 1901; Dr. Bell was the recipient of many honorary degrees from other universities. Queen's University bestowed on him her LL.D. degree in 1883, and Cambridge University honoured him with the degree of D.Sc. in 1903.

The scientific societies with which he was associated included the Chemical Society, 1865; American Institute of Mining Engineers, 1881; Royal Society of Canada, 1882; Geological Society of America, 1889; Royal Society, London, 1897; Geological Society, London; American Association for the Advancement of Science, Royal Astronomical Society, Canadian and American Forestry Associations, and the Canadian Mining Institute. He was also one of the Royal Commissioners appointed in 1888 to enquire into the Mineral Resources of the province of Ontario, a delegate representing the Canadian Government and the Royal Society of Canada at the International Geological Congress at Vienna in 1903, president of the International Congress of Americanists in 1906, president of Section IV of the Royal Society in 1893 and of the Ottawa Field Naturalists' Club 1900 to 1902.

The bibliography of Dr. Bell's writings includes over 200 reports and pamphlets, most of which are contained in the volumes of the Geological Survey, while some appear in other scientific publications. These deal mainly with the results of his explorations and cover geology, geography, forestry, biology and folk-lore. His first report addressed to Sir W. E. Logan was published in 1857 in the Report of Progress of the Geological Survey for that year and dealt with the Fauna of the Lower St. Lawrence, the Saguenay and Lake St. John. His last report was published 50 years later in the Summary Report of the Geological Survey for 1906 and referred to the important mining district of Cobalt, Ontario.

In 1877 Dr. Bell was appointed Assistant Director of the Geological and Natural History Survey of Canada and when a separate department was created out of the Geological Survey in 1890 under the Minister of the Interior, he retained the title of Assistant Director, but to this was added the title of Chief Geologist. In January, 1901,

Dr. Bell took over the administration of the department and directed the operations of the staff until April, 1906. He was superannuated in December, 1908, after almost 52 years of devotion to the interests of his country. His long service rewarded in 1903 by companionship in the Imperial Service Order, a distinction instituted by King Edward VII to more fully recognize the faithful and meritorious services rendered by the Civil Services of the Empire.

Dr. Bell's later years were spent partly at his home in Ottawa and partly on his farm in Manitoba, where he died in June, 1917.

In his religious views he was very broad-minded, and though a Presbyterian by birth and persuasion he took a keen interest in the missionary activities among the northern Indians of other denominations, and the Church of England missions on Hudson Bay are indebted to him for material assistance in carrying on their work.

The numerous honours conferred on Dr. Bell during his lifetime are an index of his ability as a scholar, while his long list of accomplishments both in the field and the study give evidence of his great industry. This was one of his outstanding characteristics, and he found his recreation in studies which to others would have been considered a labour. The performance of his duties as an explorer involved numerous risks and much hardship from fatigue, cold and hunger, yet his perseverance, patience and courage were always sufficient to carry him through to success in all his explorations.

He was a man of strong personality and he held decided opinions on all subjects. At the same time his kindly disposition caused him to be considerate of the opinions of others. In his own home he made a charming host and his hospitality was of the open-handed kind which left nothing to be desired. He was a staunch friend and was always at the service of those to whom his friendship was given.

